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ABSTRACT

A community college teacher, knowledgeable in composition and reading, worked with content area colleagues on reading and writing ideas for their courses. His "missionary work" included talking to colleagues, demonstrating teaching methods in their classrooms, and writing course materials for them. His main problems involved difficulties in getting referrals, not always being able to deliver services he had promised, doing too much for the teachers, and discontinuity in the mission due to "program-freeze politics." At a presentation of the mission to the faculty association a survey was administered that yielded data indicating the value of the mission. The following instructional techniques are recommended to others considering similar missionary work: use an overhead projector to demonstrate how to read difficult prose, show students how to write a one-sentence summary of practically anything, and help students choose a "pet word" and learn as much as possible about it. (GW)

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Working with Content-Area Colleagues

or

What's a Teacher like You Doing in a Course like This?

Silver Stanfill, Anchorage Community College

Even a single, amateur (or only moderately dedicated) learning-assister can have a significant positive effect in helping faculty to help students read and write better.

What I did

A one-semester trade of one class section for a chance to work with other teachers gave me time to collaborate with 25 colleagues: we talked, I made guest appearances in their classes, and I wrote materials for them.

Problems I had

I overcame initial difficulties in getting to people, tried to be philosophical about being unable to deliver, resolved not to repeat the mistake of being too easy, and got stopped by budget-crunch program-freeze politics.

Extending the mission

A survey taken at the rehearsal for my Long Beach presentation yielded data that may help to keep the mission going. For others tempted to try this kind of missionary work, I recommend 3 techniques: how to read Hume, a formula for writing a one-sentence summary of practically anything, and Pet Word.

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Working with Content-Area Colleagues

or

What's a Teacher like You Doing in a Course like This?

This is a pep talk for amateur or only moderately dedicated learning-assisters who--like me--want to do something about drop rates, can't tackle anything enormous, and know in their hearts that adding a couple more sections of reading courses amounts to a couple of band aids. My thesis is that one person can make a difference.

I'm a community college composition teacher who spent a sabbatical taking reading courses, returned to my problem-laden campus, and started working on part of the problem. I have 3 axioms:

1. Nobody--student, faculty, admin--ever wants to do a bad job.
2. Every teacher a reading teacher.
3. " " " writing " .

And I have an admin who trusts me enough to let me trade one class for time to work with other teachers on reading and writing ideas for their courses. This certainly isn't anything new; for years, public schools have had reading teachers or consultants who float. But on our campus, this was an innovation. I call it my missionary work.

What I did

Numbers first. I collaborated with 25 colleagues in 17 disciplines. The first fruits of our efforts reached 217 students fall 77 and will reach

132 more spring 78. (Compare: in the 3 classes I taught fall 77, I worked with 67 students.) My missionary work involved 3 kinds of things: chats-only, chats-and-shows, and chats-and-writing.

Chats were extended conversations. I'd appear at an appointed time, lugging my bag of samples, and ask, "What can I do for you?" We talked about texts: what to do with one that wasn't working out very well, and how to pick a better one for next semester. How to work with a text's study guide, or what to do if it didn't have a study guide. And--of course--readability, SQ3R, and vocabulary.

We talked about writing assignments: how badly students write, and how long it takes to grade bad papers. How to get better papers and spend less time grading them--sometimes mainly a matter of making the assignment more specific. We talked about tests: teaching how to study, teaching test-wiseness, and testing for what was taught. About grading: using course outlines, providing for varied levels and interests, and extra credit. Sometimes we'd end up just being better acquainted with each other, and sometimes we'd set up another meeting.

Shows were my guest appearances in other classes. I subbed, giving Nelson-Denneys and making a pitch for our reading courses. I demonstrated note-taking. I talked about common spelling problems. I tailored an SQ3R spiel to particular text-study guide combinations, turning it into a time-management lecture. I showed one group how to write a comparison essay.

I wrote other things. The request that hit me hardest was for a one-page handout on how to write a paragraph. I winced (we have a semester-length 3-credit course on writing paragraphs) and produced. For a book

assigned as an extra-credit term project, I prepared reading-guide questions with an easy-to-skim chart for students to use in summarizing their answers--and for the teacher to use in grading. I adapted the question-chart format for another teacher's required biography reports. For someone else's more general book report assignment, I set up a chart useable for any book a student could choose. And for a philosophy teacher facing declining attendance and comprehension when the class got to Hume (1711-1776), I wrote an outline for a how-to-read-Hume lecture.

These things were time-consuming, but not too esoteric for anyone who's had a good course in Reading in the Content Areas and/or some success in teaching freshman composition. I found working with other people's course materials fascinating. Through spelling errors, lateness for appointments, and discovery of my biases, I reviewed the experience of being a student. (I had sworn to do my best with what I was asked to do, no matter what. Then I despised a psych book. Only after grumbling through a reading guide for it--up the taxonomy--did I realize it was a pretty good book for what it was chosen to do. When I magnanimously informed my colleague so, we laughed at my de-biasing.) I learned a lot.

Problems I had

My missionary work was not all challenge, stimulation, and satisfaction. There were 4 main problems, which I list in descending order of my ability to cope with them.

1. The problem of getting to people. A special early-September mailing of 250 memos brought 2 responses. Our regular staff memo slightly garbled every item I wanted run. But I learned to drum up business by walking the halls--particularly in buildings where I didn't teach--and using rest rooms off my regular route. And after a while I was pretty

busy with referrals from people whose word-of-mouth accomplished what the memos hadn't.

2. The problem of not being able to deliver. I could do nothing to help with a chemistry text. I let an anthro teacher dangle till too late in the semester for a term paper show ("Call me when you've found some sample papers we can duplicate"). I lined up students, teacher, materials, and space for a Saturday Spelling Clinic squashed in budget-crunch program-freeze politics. I tried to be philosophical about not being able to deliver.

3. The problem of being too easy. I produced before clarifying my expectation that my clients would contribute to the cause. Some of their evaluations included gracious invitations for me to return for re-runs next semester. If I do individual study-tutoring again, I'll try to have the referring teacher come with the student. And I wouldn't sub again, because although subbing gets your foot in the door, you can't convert anyone in absentia. I could avoid being too easy in the future.

4. The problem of discontinuity in the mission itself. Politics have suspended animation. If and when they subside, my admin might consider a revival that spreads the job around: to a regular reading teacher (but what about the writing?) or to somebody whose class doesn't make (but what if that person hasn't done frosh comp or Reading in the Content Areas?) One ray of hope: he's heard no complaints about letting me off a class to run around.

Extending the mission

To rehearse for Long Beach, I volunteered to do a show for our Faculty Association's back-to-spring-semester luncheon. Double bonus: 50

people, twice the number I consorted with over the fall semester, attended the luncheon show; and my last-minute foresight in writing a consciousness-raising survey for the luncheon resulted in data that might help to keep the mission going:

Of the 37 people who had heard that the average community college student reads at a grade 9 level, only 19 used key concept vocabulary lists and only 16 knew the grade level readability of their spring texts.

Only 20 out of 50 had heard of SQ3R, but 9 of the others wanted to learn more about it. (Hmm: 9 teachers x 4 classes with up to 25 students per class; maybe 900 more students in the fold?)

A total of 30 people indicated they would take (read as would think about taking) a 3-credit course in community college teaching techniques. (Hmm: 30 x 100. The mind boggles.)

Even the luncheon-goers who used my survey form to write an editorial--condemning expenditure of TLC on remedial students misplaced in higher education--concluded "PS. Silver, keep up the good work!"

So if missionary work is not exactly alive and well on our campus right now, it's not dead, either. And if my testimony encourages you to try it, let me suggest 3 tricks from my trade.

1. Demonstrating how to read Hume (or any prose a long way from contemporary, demanding careful, accurate reading).

A. Using an overhead projection of a pertinent passage, identify words that have undergone significant semantic change (as, in Hume: enthusiasm, humorous, closet), giving eighteenth-century meaning.

B. Trace pronouns to their antecedents, marking on the transparency. Locate ellipses, marking in the "understoods."

C. Orally, read one sentence at a time, substituting modern equivalents for words whose meanings have changed, nouns for pronouns, and filling in ellipses.

D. Have students paraphrase, restating the sentence in their own words (maybe clause by clause).

E. After paraphrasing the passage, work towards identifying its main idea.

2. How to write a one-sentence summary of practically anything.[1]

Formula: A. Identify the thing being summarized;

B. Say begins with and tell what it begins with;

C. Say covers, presents, discusses, includes (etc.) and tell what comes in the middle and add a comma;

D. Say and ends with and then tell what comes last.

I have my students write one-sentence summaries of class on 3 x 5 cards turned in as they leave; I take attendance from the cards.

3. Pet word--inspired by pet rocks.[2]

An assignment developed for my vocabulary classes, adaptable even for fourth graders, and recommended for courses in which in-depth study of one word or concept is beneficial; learn as much as possible about one term: the forms it takes as different parts of speech; its etymology, its meanings, cognates or words derived from the same root; synonyms and antonyms; idions and other expressions using the word; its translation in various languages; quotations featuring the word. End up with an exercise in synesthesia (if the word synesthesia were a person, what would it look like? Sketch its autobiography. What would its future be?) or making something to represent what was learned--collage, mobile, something to eat, something to wear or listen to, etc.

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1. Stanfill, S. The great american one-sentence summary. In Ouida H. Clapp (ed.) Classroom Practices in Teaching English: Teaching the Basics--Really! NCTE '77-78.

2. Stanfill, S. Teaching vocabulary for fun and profit, Idaho Reading Report. Winter 1978, VI,2.